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ABSTRACT

This document is comprised of the two issues in volume 3 of "Parent News Offline," a publication of the National Parent Information Network (NPIN) designed to introduce those without Internet access to the activities and information available through NPIN. The Spring 2001 issue contains the following articles: (1) "What To Consider in Starting a Babysitting Co-op" (Peggy Patten); (2) "Assessing Young Children's Social Competence" (Diane E. McClellan and Lilian G. Katz); and (3) "'High-Stakes' Testing: New Guidelines Help Direct School Change" (Anne S. Robertson). Recent "Parent News" articles on child health are highlighted. The Fall 2001 issue contains the following articles: (1) "Dads, Kids, and Fun on a Saturday Morning" (Anne S. Robertson); (2) "Perspectives on Charter Schools: A Review for Parents" (Saran Donahoo); (3) "Finding Parenting Support and Education" (Anne S. Robertson); and (4) "The Fourth 'R': Teacher-Child Relationships Are Central to Quality" (Peggy Patten). Tips for finding good early reading programs are also delineated. (KB)

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PARENT NEWS OFFLINE 2001

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Anne S. Robertson, Editor
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Parent News Offline

Vol. 3, No. 1, Spring 2001

In This Issue

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What to Consider in Starting a Babysitting Co-op

Peggy Patten

Many parents find that making occasional babysitting arrangements is one of the challenging aspects of parenting young children. Sometimes it is difficult to afford or to locate qualified babysitters for the hours needed. For some parents, leaving their child with a caregiver they do not know very well is simply out of the question.

In many communities around the nation, parents pool their resources to address these challenges by starting babysitting co-ops. Babysitting co-ops come in many different forms. Some smaller co-ops are made up of 5–10 families, while larger ones may have 20–30 families. Some co-ops have adopted a centralized system with a secretary and a program director. Others are decentralized and use neither a director nor a secretary. Despite these organizational differences, all babysitting co-ops start at the community level and gradually expand to enlarge the pool of adults who share in the care of their children.

Centralized Co-ops with a Secretary

At the core of all successful babysitting co-ops are families who trust and respect each other enough to care for one another's children...

Families with young children who belong to babysitting co-ops exchange babysitting services. Centralized babysitting co-ops usually use a point system and a secretary. Families in the co-op call the co-op secretary to request babysitting services. The secretary coordinates the babysitting arrangement by contacting co-op members to identify a family that is available to babysit. The secretary maintains the point books on each family and records point deposits and withdrawals. Each family might start out with 40 points—with 4 points awarded for a one-hour babysitting session for each child—giving point values worth 10 hours of babysitting services. A family needing a three-hour babysitting session one afternoon, for example, contacts the secretary. The secretary checks her records of co-op families to see who is likely to be available during the hours requested and finds a family to fill the babysitting request. The secretary takes into account other factors, such as parents' requests for particular families and which families are most in need of points. When a family's point balance is low, the family must provide babysitting services to build its balance up. The secretary position is typically rotated among co-op members. The secretary is sometimes awarded additional points as compensation for the additional time spent performing the secretarial duties. The primary advantage to this co-op structure is convenience. The secretary makes the calls to find the sitters. It may also be easier for those called to turn down a babysitting

request when asked by the secretary rather than by a family in need.

Decentralized Co-ops without a Secretary

In decentralized babysitting co-ops, families find their own sitters from the co-op membership list. A coupon system is often used in this type of co-op. The coupon provides a tangible reminder of a family's co-op status or "wealth." Each family in the co-op might be awarded 30 coupons, with each coupon worth ½ hour of babysitting, giving them a coupon value worth 15 hours of babysitting services. Each co-op family is provided with a detailed listing of other families in the co-op that includes names, addresses, phone numbers, ages of children, pets in the home, and general hours of availability to sit. Parents needing a three-hour babysitting session one weekend morning, for example, must check their membership list and call those families who are likely to be available during the times they need care. The family in need should consider the ages of other children in the other member's home or the location of the other members. The family then "pays" for the service at the end of the babysitting session with coupons. When a family's balance of coupons is low, they must solicit "sits" from others to build up their supply. When a family's balance is high, they are encouraged to spend the coupons and get them back into circulation. Although this type of co-op does not use a formal secretary, it does require some leadership to maintain the membership lists, to distribute copies of agreed upon policies and procedures, to make and replace coupons, and to schedule social and/or business meetings. The primary advantage to this co-op structure is its simplicity and ease of implementation. There is no secretary position, and members select the families they want to call for babysitting.

Families who spend time together are likely to develop friendships that enhance the babysitting co-op experience for parents and for their children.

Essential Elements of All Babysitting Co-ops

At the core of all successful babysitting co-ops are families who trust and respect each other enough to care for one another's children with some regularity. The particular policies and procedures for operating a babysitting co-op are agreed upon by the membership families. Creating policies and procedures involves addressing such issues as these:

- whether the babysitting session occurs in the home of the "sitter" or the "sittee"
- how to "charge" for more than one child
- whether to "charge" additional coupons for hours after midnight or overnight
- how new families are added to the group
- whether substitute caregivers (such as older siblings, other relatives, or other adults) are acceptable
- who provides various consumables (e.g., diapers, food)
- how frequently families must use the co-op to be considered active members
- who the designated babysitter is when visitors or non-family members are present
- when a child is too sick for a babysitting session
- how discipline is handled when a child misbehaves

Policies and procedures need to be reviewed and revised as families in the co-op have additional children, as children grow from infants to preschoolers, and as new families join.

Families who spend time together are likely to develop friendships that enhance the babysitting co-op experience for parents and for their children. Regularly scheduled social events, such as picnics, potlucks, pizza nights, sledding or skating outings, holiday and birthday celebrations, and "adults only" nights out, provide enjoyable opportunities to strengthen the ties between adults and children in the co-op. These occasions can be combined with short "business meetings," in which adults can discuss co-op policies and procedures. When families in a co-op sustain their commitment to one another over time, they develop into a kind of community, offering support to one another beyond babysitting services. This kind of close community is particularly valuable for families who do not have relatives living nearby.

Avenues for Locating Co-op Families

Co-ops are ideally composed of families with children of approximately similar ages. Prospective co-op families might be found in your neighborhood, place of worship, workplace, fitness center, prenatal or postnatal exercise program, local YMCA/YWCA, local park district, preschool, or health clinic or pediatrician office. There is no formula for assuring that all families will "click" with one another in a babysitting co-op. If families are committed to working together to develop sound policies and procedures and establishing a system for communicating on a regular basis, they will be headed in the right direction.

For More Information

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Adapted from a January/February 2001 online *Parent News* article (http://npin.org/pnews/2001/pnew101/spot101.html).

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ERIC DIGEST
March 2001 • EDO-PS-01-2

Assessing Young Children's Social Competence

Diane E. McClellan and Lilian G. Katz

During the past two decades, a convincing body of evidence has accumulated to indicate that unless children achieve minimal social competence by about the age of 6 years, they have a high probability of being at risk into adulthood in several ways (Ladd, 2000; Parker & Asher, 1987). Recent research (Hartup & Moore, 1990; Kinsey, 2000; Ladd & Profilet, 1996; McClellan & Kinsey, 1999; Parker & Asher, 1987; Rogoff, 1990) suggests that a child's long-term social and emotional adaptation, academic and cognitive development, and citizenship are enhanced by frequent opportunities to strengthen social competence during childhood.

Hartup (1992) notes that peer relationships in particular contribute a great deal to both social and cognitive development and to the effectiveness with which we function as adults. He states that "the single best childhood predictor of adult adaptation is not school grades, and not classroom behavior, but rather, the adequacy with which the child gets along with other children. Children who are generally disliked, who are aggressive and disruptive, who are unable to sustain close relationships with other children, and who cannot establish a place for themselves in the peer culture are seriously at risk" (Hartup, 1992, p. 1). The risks are many: poor mental health, dropping out of school, low achievement and other school difficulties, and poor employment history (Katz & McClellan, 1997).

Because social development begins at birth and progresses rapidly during the preschool years, it is clear that early childhood programs should include regular opportunities for spontaneous child-initiated social play. Berk and Winsler (1995) suggest that it is through symbolic/pretend play that young children are most likely to develop both socially and intellectually. Thus, periodic assessment of children's progress in the acquisition of social competence is appropriate.

The set of items presented below is based on research on elements of social competence in young children and on studies in which the behavior of well-liked children has been compared with that of less-liked children (Katz & McClellan, 1997; Ladd & Profilet, 1996; McClellan & Kinsey, 1999).

The Social Attributes Checklist

The checklist provided in this Digest includes attributes of a child's social behavior that teachers are encouraged to examine every three or four months. Consultations with parents and other caregivers help to provide a validity check. In using the checklist, teachers are advised to note whether the attributes are typical of the child. Any child can have a few really bad days, for a variety of reasons; if assessments are to be reasonably reliable, judgments of the overall pattern of functioning over a period of at least three or four weeks are required. The checklist is intended as one of a variety of ways the social well-being of children can be assessed.

How children act toward and are treated by their classmates (cooperatively or aggressively, helpfully or demandingly, etc.) appears to have a substantial impact on the relationships they develop (Ladd, 2000). However, healthy social development does not require that a child be a "social butterfly." The most important index to note is the quality rather than the quantity of a child's friendships. Children (even rejected children) who develop a close friend increase the degree to which they feel positively about school over time (Ladd, 1999). There is evidence (Rothbart & Bates, 1998; Kagan, 1992) that some children are simply more shy or more inhibited than others, and it may be counterproductive to push such children into social relations that make them uncomfortable (Katz & McClellan, 1997). Furthermore, unless that shyness is severe enough to prevent a child from enjoying most of the "good things of life," such as birthday parties, picnics, and family outings, it is reasonable to assume that, when handled sensitively, the shyness will be spontaneously outgrown.

Many of the attributes listed in the checklist below indicate adequate social growth if they characterize the child's *usual* behavior. This qualifier is included to ensure that occasional fluctuations do not lead to over-interpretation of children's temporary difficulties. On the basis of frequent direct contact with the child, observation in a variety of situations, and information obtained from parents and other caregivers, a teacher or caregiver can use the checklist as an informal research-based means of assessing each child's social and emotional well-being. It is intended to provide a guideline for teachers and parents and is based on several teacher rating scales (all demonstrating high internal reliability) used by researchers to measure children's social behavior. Most of these scales (Ladd, 2000; Ladd & Profilet, 1996; McClellan & Kinsey, 1999) have also been replicated on more than one occasion and have demonstrated high reliability over time.

Teachers can observe and monitor interactions among children and let children who rarely have difficulties attempt to solve conflicts by themselves before intervening. If a child appears to be doing well on most of the attributes and characteristics in the checklist, then it is reasonable to assume that occasional social difficulties will be outgrown without intervention. It is also reasonable to assume that children will strengthen their social skills, confidence, and independence by being entrusted to solve their social difficulties without adult assistance. However, if a child seems to be doing poorly on many of the items listed, the responsible adults can implement strategies that will help the child to overcome and outgrow the social difficulties. The checklist is not a prescription for "correct social behavior"; rather it is an aid to help teachers observe, understand, and support children as they grow in social skillfulness. If a child seems to be doing poorly on many of the items on the list, strategies can be implemented to help the child to establish more satisfying relationships with other children (Katz & McClellan, 1997).

Children's current and long-term social-emotional development, as well as cognitive and academic (Kinsey, 2000) development, are clearly affected by the child's social experiences with peers and adults. It is important to keep in mind that children vary in social behavior for a variety of reasons. Research indicates that children have distinct personalities and temperaments from birth (Rothbart & Bates, 1998; Kagan, 1992). In addition, nuclear and extended family relationships and cultural contexts also affect social behavior. What is appropriate or effective social behavior in one culture may not be in another. Many children thus may need help in bridging their differences and in finding ways to learn from and enjoy the company of one another. Teachers have a responsibility to be proactive in creating a classroom community that accepts and supports all children.

The Social Attributes Checklist

I. Individual Attributes

The child:

1. Is **usually** in a positive mood.
2. Is not **excessively** dependent on adults.
3. **Usually** comes to the program willingly.
4. **Usually** copes with rebuffs adequately.
5. Shows the capacity to empathize.
6. Has positive relationships with one or two peers; shows the capacity to really care about them and miss them if they are absent.
7. Displays the capacity for humor.
8. Does not seem to be acutely lonely.

II. Social Skills Attributes

The child **usually**:

1. Approaches others positively.
2. Expresses wishes and preferences clearly; gives reasons for actions and positions.
3. Asserts own rights and needs appropriately.
4. Is not easily intimidated by bullies.
5. Expresses frustrations and anger effectively and without escalating disagreements or harming others.
6. Gains access to ongoing groups at play and work.
7. Enters ongoing discussion on the subject; makes relevant contributions to ongoing activities.
8. Takes turns fairly easily.
9. Shows interest in others; exchanges information with and requests information from others appropriately.
10. Negotiates and compromises with others appropriately.
11. Does not draw inappropriate attention to self.
12. Accepts and enjoys peers and adults of ethnic groups other than his or her own.
13. Interacts nonverbally with other children with smiles, waves, nods, etc.

III. Peer Relationship Attributes

The child:

1. Is **usually** accepted versus neglected or rejected by other children.
2. Is **sometimes** invited by other children to join them in play, friendship, and work.
3. Is named by other children as someone they are friends with or like to play and work with.

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Recent Online *Parent News* Articles Spotlight Child Health

Two January-February 2001 *Parent News* articles examine an issue that has many parents concerned: child health.

In "Physical Fitness for a Lifetime," Anne Robertson points to the declining number of hours per week school-age youth spend engaged in physical activity. This trend is related in part to the premium that schools are placing on academic preparation, which pushes "nonessential" courses like physical education (PE) to the side. For many students, these courses are the only real opportunity for vigorous physical exercise. The results, Robertson explains, are far-reaching: half of all youth ages 12–21 get no regular, vigorous physical exercise.

While youth physical activity continues to decrease, children's home lifestyles also encourage some serious weight gain problems. Peggy Patten's "Obesity in Children: Should Parents Be Concerned?" covers the rise in the incidence of overweight and obese children and its causes. Modern lifestyles provide children with increasing numbers of opportunities to eat unhealthy foods and avoid physical exercise by watching TV and playing video games. However, it is also possible for parents who are concerned about their children's weight to go to extremes, mistaking lingering baby fat or a larger body type for unhealthy body fat. So, what can parents and schools do?

Robertson's article points out some specific programs that use PE to encourage lifelong health habits in children. By identifying causes, Patten's article points out some lifestyle habits that parents can encourage to help their children avoid becoming or staying overweight or obese. Equally important, because of the dangers of erroneously labeling a child, Patten also suggests some ways parents can find out if their child is overweight or obese.

Both articles include lists of sources and suggest some resources parents can use to get more information on these issues.

The articles are at: http://npin.org/pnews/2001/pnew101.html

"High-Stakes" Testing: New Guidelines Help Direct School Change

Anne S. Robertson

The Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights developed a guide for schools, policy makers, and parents that can provide information about the use of standardized testing for "high-stakes" purposes. Information about the guide is located at http://www.ed.gov/offices/OCR/testing/.

As more states use tests to determine whether a student will advance grade levels or graduate, many groups debate how valid testing is for that purpose. Some groups say that high-stakes tests may harm the future of students with limited English proficiency (Olson, 2000a), while others argue that the emphasis on such tests has eclipsed other important educational needs (Bradley, 2000). Many parents are also opposed to using tests to make high-stakes decisions and are worried about the stress that these tests may place on their children.

However, many parents support testing. A test-makers' industry group says that most parents use tests, along with report cards and other measures, to gauge their child's progress and would support requiring schools to publish test results (Olson, 2000b). Combined with other assessment techniques, such as observing students, evaluating daily work, meeting with parents, and tracking students' development, testing may help parents and teachers identify a student's abilities, level of knowledge, and learning needs.

Some school districts are adjusting their policies to accommodate different learning needs and their state's standards. For example, in Rochester, New York, students now have the option to graduate early or finish school in five years, allowing them more time to meet state standards while also diminishing the hopelessness that students may feel if they are unable to meet state guidelines (Johnston, 2000). Such innovative changes may help balance the needs of students with the state's high expectations and testing requirements.

For More Information

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Adapted from a March/April 2001 online *Parent News* article (http://npin.org/pnews/2000/pnew1100/int1100b.html).

About NPIN and *Parent News Offline*

The National Parent Information Network (NPIN) was funded by the U.S. Department of Education in 1992 to collect and disseminate high-quality resources for parents. NPIN is supported through the ERIC system and produced by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education and the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education. Recently redesigned, NPIN's Web site is one of the largest noncommercial collections of parenting information on the Internet (http://npin.org). In addition to its Web site, NPIN offers question-answering services via a toll-free telephone number (800-583-4135) and by email through the AskERIC service (askeric@askeric.org).

Another service provided by NPIN is *Parent News*, an Internet magazine that focuses on topics of interest to parents and professionals who work with parents. Many of the articles featured in *Parent News* have been developed in direct response to frequently asked questions. *Parent News Offline* has been created in response to requests for a newsletter that would introduce those without Internet access to the activities and information available through NPIN. We encourage you to share both our online and offline resources, including ERIC/EECE Digests, with parenting groups, schools, and community initiatives.

Recent Uploads

Check out the following recently uploaded documents at http://npin.org/new.html#m=2001

- Issues Related to Estimating the Home-Schooled Population in the United States with National Household Survey Data

  The National Center for Education Statistics describes the problems involved in measuring how common home schooling actually is.

- Family Involvement in Children's Education: Successful Local Approaches (An Idea Book)

  This U.S. Department of Education publication presents 20 examples of programs that have increased family involvement.

- New Skills for New Schools: Preparing Teachers in Family Involvement

  This document from the Harvard Family Research Project can assist teachers in understanding the "hows" of handling family involvement in education.

- Reaching All Families: Creating Family-Friendly Schools

  Outreach is important to increasing parent involvement. Teachers interested in understanding and overcoming barriers to involvement may find this document a valuable resource.

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Parent News Offline

Vol. 3, No. 2, Fall 2001

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Finding Parenting Support and Education

The Fourth 'R': Teacher-Child Relationships Are Central to Quality

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Finding Good Early Reading Programs

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Dads, Kids, and Fun on a Saturday Morning

Anne S. Robertson

Imagine walking into your local school gym on a Saturday morning and seeing about 190 dads and children playing a variety of games. This is exactly what you could have observed recently during Sparta School District's program called "Dogs with Dad." This particular Saturday was the second in a series of successful sessions in this small, southern Illinois community that were designed specifically to attract fathers of young and elementary-age children and to help them feel connected to their children's lives.

Research shows positive outcomes when parents are involved with their children's education, including higher grades and test scores, regular school attendance, positive attitude and appropriate behavior, and a reduced need for remedial work or special education (Henderson & Berla, 1994). However, raising a family and working long hours often mean that there is limited time available for parents to play a role in their child's education during the regular school day. Evenings are frequently taken up with sports events, music lessons, homework, and housework. Many parents are becoming more discerning about taking on activities not directly related to work or family, making it more difficult for teachers to engage parents in school-related activities.

> It is clear that fathers make a unique and important contribution to their child's academic development.

According to teacher and father Terry Waldron, fathers who are working extremely long hours and have not traditionally been involved in their children's education may find it particularly difficult to feel included.

Yet, it is clear that fathers make a unique and important contribution to their child's academic development. In *A Call to Commitment* (U.S. Department of Education, 2000), researchers note that while children benefit from the involvement of both parents, fathers can provide additional benefits by modeling appropriate adult male behavior, providing financial and emotional support, and encouraging problem solving. There is some research to suggest that children of involved fathers are more likely to have consistently higher grades than children of absent or uninvolved fathers, and are less likely to be suspended or expelled from school (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). Other research suggests that mothers and fathers play important but complementary roles. For example, in families where both parents are active caregivers of their children, mothers are more likely to assume the role of nurturer, comforter, and counselor, while fathers are more likely to emphasize the importance of skills leading toward work, boundaries, and discipline. Fathers are also more likely to get down on the carpet and engage their kids in the rough-and-tumble play that delights young children and also teaches the

child important lessons about social interaction and appropriate touch (Klinger, 1997).

With the goal of finding innovative ways to include fathers in school-related activities, Terry and several of his colleagues decided to try something a bit different. It all started when Sparta school district staff members Melissa Gross and Penny King attended an urban education conference in Springfield, Illinois, and heard two presenters discuss the importance of fathering. Melissa and Penny invited the speakers from the Center for Successful Fathering to their small town in southern Illinois to present a workshop for school staff. The Center provides a variety of workshops and resources to help identify the unique contributions that fathers bring to their children's growth and development, along with creative ways to engage dads. At this workshop and another training event that Terry and a local minister attended in Texas, they learned more about the importance of fathering. They also met people who had been successfully working with fathers from urban, rural, and migrant populations. Several common themes for successfully working with dads seemed to emerge. For example, fathers want to have more time with their children but are unsure about where to start. Fathers want the time they spend working with and for their children to be meaningful, and most dads simply want to have more time to play with their children.

With this new information, Terry and his team returned to Sparta and developed what they hoped would be the first of four sessions that would include not only educational time for dads but also social time for fathers to play with their kids. Rather than plan another evening event, they decided to try Saturday morning and called the first session "Doughnuts with Dad." Equipped with coffee, juice, and boxes of doughnuts, the organizers hoped for a group of about 25 but were amazed to find a turnout of 86 dads and kids. The dads met separately for the first 45 minutes while the kids were being "wrangled" (playing) in the gym under the supervision of volunteer high school students. The dads spent their time talking about their experiences of fatherhood, as well as getting more information about the unique role of fathers. The next 45 minutes were spent with the fathers and children playing non-competitive games together.

Terry found, through the small group discussions, that some of the men had grown up without a father figure in the household, and consequently they were unsure about their role in the family and their influence on their child's growth and development. The support of the other dads and the resources provided were helpful for each father as he began to think about his unique contribution to the family. Terry also discovered that many of the men didn't know what they were getting into because their wives had signed them up for the program and then "booted" them out of the house on that Saturday morning!

The evaluations from the morning's program showed that the dads and kids had a great time. When asked if he had received any negative feedback from single moms who may have felt excluded, Terry responded that he had not. But, he continued, the message that they are trying to send through this program is that ideally kids need the positive support of both parents and that "a woman may not need a husband, but a child needs a father."

The next session was snowed out, but Terry knew they were on the right track when dads started calling him at home on Saturday morning to make sure that the session would be rescheduled. The attendance at the rescheduled "Dogs with Dads" (hotdogs were served instead of doughnuts) more than doubled from the first session. Fathers came from other communities, including one dad who had driven in from another state for the event. Also included were "father figures," men to whom children with absent fathers turn when they want a father's involvement.

At the end of the second session, fathers commented that not only did they enjoy the information that they received during the educational sessions, but they also enjoyed seeing their children play with friends and meeting the friends' dads. Once again, the event was a huge success. The group is looking for a site that will hold a larger number for the spring session, which they plan to have at the local park and call "Picnic with Pop." Terry says that as long as the dads and kids keep coming he will keep on supplying the education, activities, and catchy names.

You can find out more about Sparta School District's Fatherhood Initiative Events by visiting http://www.sparta.k12.il.us/SID/Fatherhood/fatherhood1.htm.

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Perspectives on Charter Schools: A Review for Parents

Saran Donahoo

In recent years, many parents, educators, students, researchers, and observers have reached the same conclusion: Traditional schools do not work for all students (Finn et al., 2000; B. Nelson et al., 2000). As a result, many states have passed laws enabling the development of charter schools as an attempt to better meet the needs of those students who are not being adequately served by traditional schools. Although the number of charter schools has grown in the last few years, it still is sometimes unclear what they have to offer students, parents, and educators that more traditional schools do not already provide. This Digest offers some general information on charter schools, discusses how they have been perceived, and summarizes the results of research on them.

What Is a Charter School?

A charter school is a public school of choice established through a contract that specifies the operating procedures of the school and the length of time that the school will receive public support. In most cases, a state or a local school board issues the individual school's contract or charter. Some states have created school boards specifically responsible for monitoring charter schools (B. Nelson et al., 2000).

As described by Finn et al. (2000), a charter school is considered a hybrid of public and private schools. Like public schools, charter schools are open to all students, although some may have a specific focus that is likely to appeal to some families more than others. However, charter schools are similar to private schools in that they are independent and self-governing, and the students, parents, and teachers choose to participate in the school. Unlike either traditional public or private schools, charter schools are viewed by some as more accountable for student performance because the school may be closed if it fails to produce promised or desired results (Finn et al., 2000).

Currently, 37 states plus the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico allow for the founding of charter schools (B. Nelson et al., 2000; Sandham, 2001). Charter school legislation differs in each state, but most states allow charter schools to be established by public, private, or civic organizations. School districts, colleges and universities, community groups, and parent groups have chosen to launch charter schools (Finn et al., 2000; Schneider, 1999). For the most part, charter schools are either newly created schools or pre-existing public or private schools that convert to charter status for greater autonomy or access to public funds (Northwest Regional Education Laboratory [NWREL], 2000). The federal government sees charter schools as a way of increasing school choice and plans to provide funding to assist charter schools (Bush, 2001).

Many charter schools were founded to decrease existing achievement gaps by improving the educational opportunities available to certain segments of the student population or to promote specific social skills as well as academics. Examples of charter school agendas include serving hard-to-educate students, teaching a multicultural curriculum, and promoting a curriculum that emphasizes conflict resolution and other social skills (Schneider, 1999). Some of these schools have also established contracts with for-profit companies to provide many of their services, including food service, curriculum, or management.

What Are People Saying about Charter Schools?

Since the first charter school law was passed in 1991, charter schools have continued to gain national interest and support. Proponents believe that charter schools are a practical alternative to traditional schools because they allow parents to choose the schools their children attend without having to pay tuition. Supporters also contend that they help to promote improvements in public education by increasing competition among schools (Finn et al., 2000; Lasley & Bainbridge, 2001).

Opponents contend that charter schools may have a damaging effect on public education. While charter schools increase school choice, some argue that they also direct resources away from urban and rural public schools that serve students from low-income families. Furthermore, the fact that over half of the current charter schools serve only elementary-grade students suggests that they have not had a significant impact on school choice at the middle and high school levels (Lasley & Bainbridge, 2001).

Another criticism of charter schools is that they lack stability. Since 1992, 59 charter schools have opened and closed; 27 schools closed during the 1998-1999 school year alone (B. Nelson et al., 2000). Many closures appear to have resulted from serious management or financial problems (Archer, 2000). Financing is often a major concern since most charter schools do not receive funds to cover facilities and other related expenses (Finn et al., 2000). In addition, most state funding policies give no consideration to the costs of facilities, transportation, and resources for at-risk or special education students when approving charter school budgets (F. Nelson et al., 2000).

Even so, many charter schools have learned to operate successfully by reducing their costs. Some strategies used to lower costs include hiring uncertified teachers, using parents and other volunteers instead of paid staff in uncertified positions, and providing only academic/classroom-related services.

What Does the Research Say about Charter Schools?

Most research on charter schools has compared regulations governing charter schools in different states, assessed parent satisfaction, described how these schools differ from and affect traditional public schools, assessed how well charter schools serve specific populations of students, or discussed the place

these schools have in public education (Cheung et al., 1998; Fiore et al., 2000; Jennings et al., 1998; Borsa et al., 1999; B. Nelson et al., 2000; Rhim & McLaughlin, 2000; Zollers & Ramanathan, 1998).

Research data on charter schools to date have generally been gathered through the use of surveys and questionnaires. Because of the short length of charter schools' existence and differing approaches to assessment, it is difficult to determine whether or not attending charter schools improves student academic performance.

In one of the few studies that examined academic achievement, Cheung et al. (1998) used surveys to assess the impact charter schools have on student achievement. They concluded that students enrolled in 21 of 31 charter schools studied improved performance on two rounds of the same standardized achievement tests since entering the charter school. But the authors warn against making achievement comparisons between charter school students and those who attend other public schools. For example, charter schools that serve low-income families or students who do not speak English at home may be viewed as academically unsuccessful when compared with local district schools serving a broader range of students (Cheung et al., 1998).

For the most part, researchers seem to agree that parents who use charter schools are satisfied with them because they get to choose the schools for themselves (Finn et al., 2000; Teske et al., 2000). Some parents also believe that charter schools provide a more culturally sensitive education and environment than traditional schools (Schnaiberg, 2000).

Another common research area related to charter schools is special education. Many state charter laws make little or no mention of how these schools are expected to serve students with disabilities. Many charter schools choose to discourage students with disabilities from enrolling or do not comply with federal special education statutes because they feel these services are too costly to provide (Jennings et al., 1998; Rhim & McLaughlin, 2000; Zollers & Ramanathan, 1998). Although it is illegal for public schools to discriminate when enrolling students, many charter schools are not prepared to serve students with disabilities.

Other notable research findings include the following:

- Charter schools may deter some minority, poor, and working families from seeking enrollment by requiring them to complete volunteer hours and failing to provide transportation and free lunches to eligible students (Schnaiberg, 2000).
- The racial composition of charter schools tends to follow the same patterns found in local area public schools (B. Nelson et al., 2000).
- Most charter schools do not require their teachers to be certified (Borsa et al., 1999).

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Finding Parenting Support and Education

Anne S. Robertson

Parenting support and education classes come in a wide variety of shapes and sizes. Some are as informal as a few mothers gathering weekly as part of a neighborhood parent-toddler group. More structured groups may use a parenting curriculum or other child development resources, be part of a national organization, and require a time commitment and "homework" from the parent. In some cases, attendance at highly structured parenting classes is mandatory for parents who are at risk of losing custody of their children. Highly structured parenting education classes, facilitated by a parenting education professional, are usually mandatory for people interested in becoming foster or adoptive parents. The value and purpose of each level of a parenting support and education class depend on the needs of the parents and their child's stage of development.

Contacting the local library, local religious organizations, recreation centers (like the YMCA/YWCA), maternity or pediatric units of local hospitals, local Cooperative Extension offices, local preschools, Head Start, Parents as Teachers, regional child care resource and referral agencies, or local school district is a good first step toward finding a parenting group, and several national groups can help.

A responsive parenting support or education program should be able to answer the following questions:

- What are the goals of the program?
- What is the program's philosophy?
- What are the qualifications of the program's leader?
- What is the cost and the time commitment?
- Does the program allow time to share problems and ideas with other parents?

Source

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Adapted from a March/April 2001 online *Parent News* article (http://npin.org/pnews/2001/pnew301/spot301.html).

The Fourth 'R': Teacher-Child Relationships Are Central to Quality

Peggy Patten

When parents look for signs that their child is receiving "high-quality" child care, they may focus on features such as how many students there are per teacher, what qualifications the teacher has, whether the children appear to be happy, and how the child care space looks—how clean and well-lit it is, and whether there is a generous supply of toys and equipment.

But an article in the online March-April *Parent News* says that *how* a child care provider interacts with the children can also have a powerful effect on many aspects of the children's development. The features of a teacher-child relationship are hard to examine, but research has begun to isolate elements of the teacher-child relationship that help the child's long-term social and academic development.

In this relationship, emotional attachment is very important. Things that foster this attachment include sensitive, warm, responsive, respectful caregiving, and having the same teacher or caregiver for a long period of time. Does the caregiver treat your children the way you would want them to be treated? Do the caregiver and children seem to have close relationships?

Of course, some issues like teacher pay and teacher-student ratio can help or hinder the caregiver-child relationship. For instance, several studies suggest that high levels of teacher education, few children per teacher, and good teacher wages can help maintain good teacher-child relationships. States that pay close attention to adult-child ratios and teacher education tend to have high-quality child care. Also, teachers' wages are related to rates of teacher turnover, which affect the continuity of care.

The article also compares child care providers' responses in some typical situations: an infant reaches out to touch his caretaker's shirt during a diaper changing; a toddler brings her bear to day care; a preschooler announces that she has read the book the teacher is about to read. The way that the caregiver acknowledges and interacts with the child in these everyday situations can make worlds of difference in how beneficial a child care experience is to a child. Each of these situations is a chance for care providers to build high-quality relationships.

The article is on the Web at http://npin.org/pnews/2001/pnew301/int301c.html.

About NPIN and *Parent News Offline*

The National Parent Information Network (NPIN) was funded by the U.S. Department of Education in 1992 to collect and disseminate high-quality resources for parents. NPIN is supported through the ERIC system and produced by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education and the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education. NPIN's Web site is one of the largest noncommercial collections of parenting information on the Internet (http://npin.org). In addition to its Web site, NPIN offers question-answering services via a toll-free telephone number (800-583-4135) and by email through the AskERIC service (askeric@askeric.org).

Another service provided by NPIN is *Parent News*, an Internet magazine that focuses on topics of interest to parents and professionals who work with parents. Many of the articles featured in *Parent News* have been developed in direct response to frequently asked questions. *Parent News Offline* has been created in response to requests for a newsletter that would introduce those without Internet access to the activities and information available through NPIN. We encourage you to share both our online and offline resources with parenting groups, schools, and community organizations.

Finding Good Early Reading Programs

First Lady Laura Bush believes that high-quality early reading programs can help young children prepare for school. A recent issue of *Parent News* reprinted the First Lady's list of characteristics that parents can look for in a good early reading program. The list includes the following features:

- Every teacher is excited about reading and promotes the value and fun of reading to students.
- All students are carefully evaluated, beginning in kindergarten, to see what they know and what they need to become good readers.
- Reading instruction and practice lasts 90 minutes or more a day in first, second, and third grades and 60 minutes a day in kindergarten.
- Before- or after-school help is given to all students beyond first grade who need extra instruction or who need to review skills. Summer school is available for students who are behind at the end of the year.

You can find the entire list online at:
http://www.npin.org/pnews/2001/pnew501/int501d.html.

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